

# Provocation, Conflict, and Appropriation: The Role of the Designer in Making Publics

Karin Hansson, Laura Forlano,  
Jaz Hee-jeong Choi, Carl DiSalvo,  
Teresa Cerratto Pargman, Shaowen  
Bardzell, Silvia Lindtner, Somya Joshi

- 1 Carl DiSalvo, *Adversarial Design* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012).
- 2 For critical design, see Anthony Dunne and Fabiana Raby, *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013); and Jeffrey Bardzell and Shaowen Bardzell, "What Is 'critical' about Critical Design?" In *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems - CHI '13* (New York: ACM, 2013), 3297–306. For reflective design, see Sengers, Phoebe, Kirsten Boehner, Shay David, and Joseph "Jofish" Kaye, *Reflective Design, Proceedings of the 4th Decennial Conference on Critical Computing between Sense and Sensibility - CC '05* (New York: ACM Press, 2005).
- 3 See speculative design, critical making, design fiction, and feminist utopian design, respectively, in Anthony Dunne and Fabiana Raby, *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013); Matt Ratto, "Critical Making: Conceptual and Material Studies in Technology and Social Life," *The Information Society* 27, no. 4 (2011): 252–60; Julian Bleecker, "Design Fiction: A Short Essay on Design, Science, Fact and Fiction," *Near Future Laboratory* (March 2009): 49; and Shaowen Bardzell, "Utopias of Participation: Feminism, Design, and the Futures," *ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction (TOCHI)*, (February 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1145/3127359>.
- 4 Carl DiSalvo, *Adversarial Design* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012).

The role and embodiment of the designer/artist in making publics is significant. This special issue draws attention to reflexive practices in Art and Design and questions how these practices are embedded in the formation and operations of publics. Participatory design research conducted in the United States, India, Turkey, England, Denmark, and Belgium provide a rich material from where we formulate some typologies of participation in research and design describing the designer's roles and relations. These typologies describe different and sometimes conflicting epistemologies, providing designers with a vocabulary to communicate a diversity of participatory settings and thus supporting reflexive practices.

Design as provocation—as a means to create awareness for political issues and as part of social processes—has been explored thoroughly in the context of participatory design<sup>1</sup> Ambitions to approach design and the design process so as to problematize design and research objectives, as well as to question broader sociotechnical and cultural configurations, are described in concepts such as critical design and reflective design.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, speculative design, critical making, design fiction, and feminist utopian design view the design process as a way to critique social and political norms and values and to suggest alternative interpretations and possibilities.<sup>3</sup> Adversarial design emphasizes the agonistic space brought together in the design process as a way to reformulate political issues.<sup>4</sup> These approaches share an underlying commitment to viewing design as embedded in the production of publics and to making political and social issues, and shared struggles, visible. The motivation is often much less about designing objects and more about "infrastructuring," or

enabling careful assemblages and alternative pathways for connection and participation.<sup>5</sup> From this perspective, designers are required to make a long-term commitment to the publics that, through their design, they help to develop.

When design in this way becomes less tangible and more process oriented, the embodiment of design by the designer/artist/researcher becomes an interesting domain for scholarly exploration, inviting us to look more closely at how we appropriate and reformulate design and participation. For example, through the notion of “speculative fabulation,” Haraway, drawing on Marilyn Strathern’s ethnographic work on gender, stresses the importance of the situatedness and materiality of the design space.<sup>6</sup> Design as speculation and provocation introduces a role in which the designer clearly articulates a perspective, rather than acting as an observer or a moderator of opinions.<sup>7</sup> Speculative and critical design approaches share the idea of design as a way to encourage discussion, rather than being a result of discussion, thus accentuating the designer’s role as an artist or activist for a cause.

As the design concept is expanding, containing a greater diversity, the roles that participation can play in the design process also becomes more diverse: from participation as a way to generate data where the participants as relatively passive informants providing data observed by the designer, to participation as a way to reveal antagonistic interests and belongings where the participants are active subjects and co-researchers. Therefore, confusion often arises over what participation actually means, especially in inter- and transdisciplinary settings. Furthermore, more critical and reflective practices are needed within participatory design, especially focusing on the role of the designer and the differences and inequalities in the participatory design setting. This special issue gathers research that addresses these questions. Central to this research is the notion of the public in the Deweyan sense. Dewey speaks of a public as formed when people become aware of how certain forces and consequences affect them collectively and when they have the means to recognize and communicate this collective.<sup>8</sup> However, as some of the authors in this special issue show, defining or provoking a public into being—supported by different modes of expressions—does in itself impose several norms and rules on what constitutes such a public.

The article by Andreas Birkbak, Morten Krogh Petersen, and Tobias Bornakke Jørgensen, on the topic of supporting discussion around a data set on the Danish power elite, points out a normative and practical problem when designing for potential publics. Designing *with* publics instead of *for* them adds a subtle but important change of attitude toward the role of the designer.

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5 Erling Björgvinsson, Pelle Ehn, and Per-Anders Hillgren, “Participatory Design and ‘Democratizing Innovation,’” In *Proceedings of the 11th Biennial Participatory Design Conference on - PDC '10*, 41 (New York: ACM Press, 2010).

6 Marilyn Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988); Donna Haraway, “SF: Science Fiction, Speculative Fabulation, String Figures, So Far,” *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, no. 3 (January 2013).

7 Christopher A. Le Dantec and Carl DiSalvo, “Infrastructuring and the Formation of Publics in Participatory Design,” *Social Studies of Science* 43, no. 2 (2013): 241–64.

8 John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems: An Essay in Political Inquiry* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012).

In this special issue, the visual project *Atlas Frictions*, by Paolo Patelli and Giuditta Vendrame, addresses the fact that the public space is always designed by someone who is forming the way we move and act, constraining our possible actions but also making action possible. Such design is reproduced performatively by the inhabitants of this space, including some people while excluding others. Thus, the space is both a product of social or political action and a ground for further action. Binder et al. suggest that these design spaces are agonistic public spaces and connect them to the term “thing” in ancient Nordic and Germanic cultures, signifying the meetings, rituals, and places where disputes were dealt with and political discussions took place.<sup>9</sup> In this interpretation, design processes are socio-material collectives that accommodate conflicts and handle controversies. These agonistic public spaces are far from the idea of participatory design as spaces for deliberative processes; rather, they are spaces for agonistic pluralism.<sup>10</sup>

This perspective becomes evident especially when designing for vulnerable groups of people. In an article about participatory design in the contexts of mental health in the United Kingdom, Paola Pierri questions the oversimplification of participatory design in public and community organizations. To avoid it, she suggests a phenomenological approach to participation emphasizing the role of affect. Her case study shows the importance of time and *recognition* for participation, as well as the role played by the continuous moments of reflection throughout the progression of the project. The complex roles of the design and the designer also are discussed in Annapurna Mamidipudi’s interviews with designers who work with vulnerable craft communities in India, and who mediate the tension between traditional craft economies and capitalist markets. By defining different positions for the actors in this context, the author provides a vocabulary for articulating the complex relations involved in design practices for social change. She describes three positions on a scale of epistemologies, ranging from “intervention,” where the designer enables economic development in a crafts community; to support of “interaction,” where craftspeople actively participate in socio-technical networks of production; to “mediations” in which craftspeople are treated by the designer as experts in their own right.

In the context of an action-research project about urban wastewater governance in Indonesia, Tanja Rosenqvist suggests that the designer’s role is to provide infrastructure; designers in this role can be “activists,” actively suggesting certain norms and values in the process. In this case, designers have to make explicit their own agendas, aiming for transparency and a clarification of the ethical considerations involved.

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9 Thomas Binder, Giorgio De Michelis, Pelle Ehn, Giulio Jacucci, Per Linde, and Ina Wagner, *Design Things* (Cambridge, MA: MIT press, 2011).

10 Chantal Mouffe, “Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?” *Social Research* 66, no. 3 (1999): 745–58.

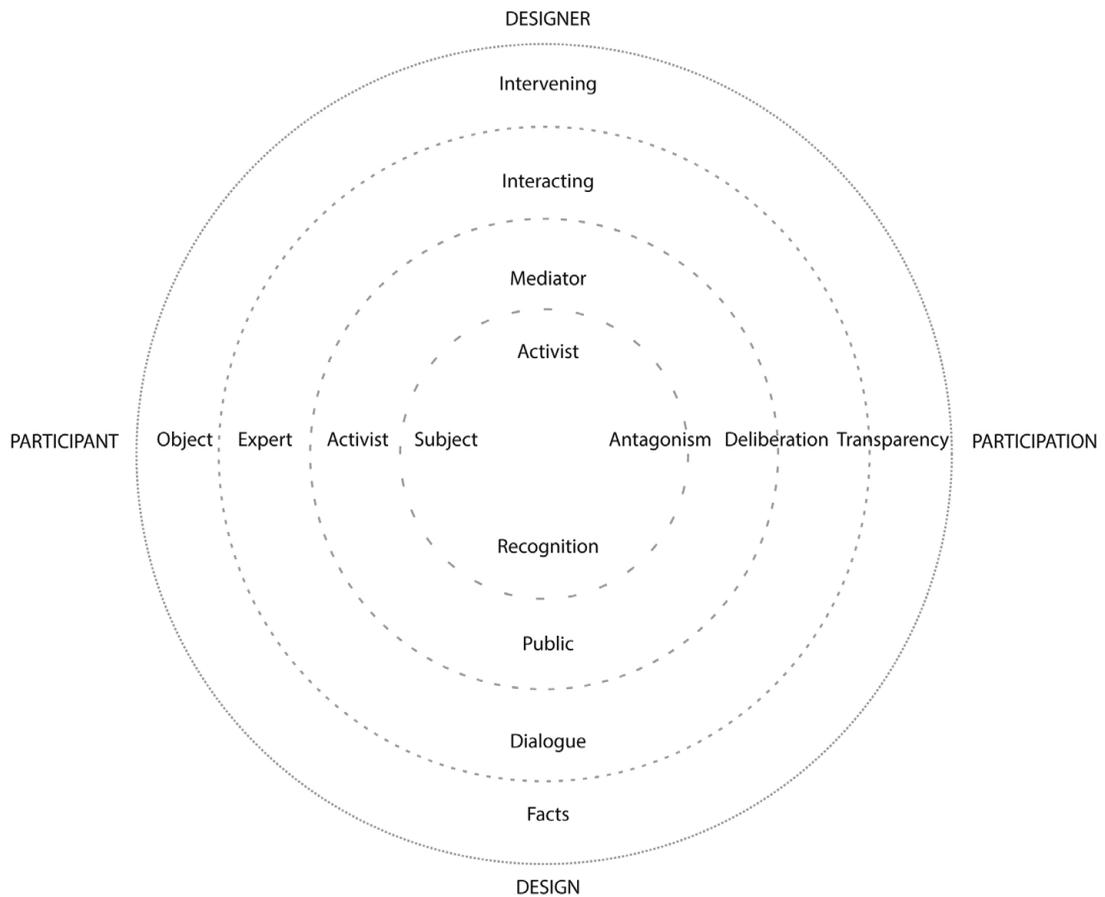


Figure 1  
A typology of participation in participatory design, conveying attitudes toward the designer, the participant, the design, and participation.

Otto von Busch and Cigdem Kaya, using craft empowerment projects in India and Turkey as cases, suggest that Amartya Sen's and Martha Nussbaum's capability approach can provide an analytical tool for designers, describing the micro–macro relations between internal and external capabilities in the context of design.<sup>11</sup> The capability approach is also a central theory in the article by Huybrechts, Dreessen, and Hagedaars describing some of the challenges of public participation when designing alternative futures for urban development. By analyzing how capability-building took shape through democratic participation in the Traces of Coal project, which creates new uses for an underused railway track in Belgium, they provide a typology for democratic dialogues that can be useful in understanding and infrastructuring similar processes. Here, they suggest different roles for the design, from visualized facts that create transparency, to a reflective practice supporting dialogue, to expressions in a public sphere, to recognition for diversity.

11 Amartya Sen, *Commodities and Capabilities* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1985); and Martha Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

James Malazita looks at education practices in the Programs in Design and Innovation (PDI) at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York, analyzing how speculative critical design can provide a space for exploration by establishing a platform that encourages critical design thinking across multiple design disciplines. In this context, speculative design thinking enables students not only to rethink the role of design in society, but also to redefine their roles as designers.

This set of articles provides valuable insights about how design practices are part of the formation and constitution of publics. Furthermore, they suggest some useful typologies to describe the role of the designer, the role of the design, and the role of participation to support reflexive practices. These different typologies describe a range of sometimes conflicting ontologies and epistemologies in the participatory design setting, providing us with a vocabulary to express the relations between participatory positions (see Figure 1). Specifically, they consider designing as intervention, interacting, mediating, and activism and understand the participant in corresponding terms of object, participant, expert, and subject.

These positions should not be seen as a continuum ranging from stronger to weaker participatory values, but as positions that come with different ethical, epistemological, ontological, and political implications for research and design.